

THE AT-HOME PARTNERS' GUIDE TO HEALTHY BEHAVIORS

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Although most people recognize that deployment is stressful for service members, they may not be aware of the considerable mental and physical toll that deployment places on at-home partners. At-home partners typically report a variety of barriers that prohibit them from engaging in healthy behaviors, especially when their service member is deployed. I know that I certainly struggled with engaging in these healthy behaviors when my service member was deployed this past year. Having him gone gave me added stress and worry that interfered with my ability to perform seemingly basic behaviors such as physical activity, a healthy diet, social connections, and stress management. Recent research has shown that there are barriers to these types of healthy behaviors for at-home partners during a service member's deployment. These can include parenting demands, financial concerns, lack of time/motivation, and inconvenience. While many people experience these barriers without ties to military service, these barriers become harder to breach when you are feeling alone and sad that your service member is gone. To overcome these seemingly insurmountable barriers, I've put together a list of potential solutions to address these problems and incorporate healthy behaviors into your daily routine based on research and shared experience.

Physical activity:

While my service member was deployed, I had a hard time convincing myself to get up and go to the gym to exercise. It seemed like more of a chore than something to make me feel better. As a student, I found that parking my car further from class or in the back of the grocery store parking lot gave me more opportunities to walk more, which made adding exercise into my

daily routine a lot easier. Another option is to try at-home workouts. For example, there are multiple workout video options on YouTube for free that can become a part of your daily routine without taking up too much time.

Diet:

When faced with negative emotions, many people tend to crave and ingest unhealthy foods. My go to unfortunately was lots of sweets, which decreased my energy levels and, in the long run, made me feel worse. To manage this unhealthy eating, meal prepping or planning meals at the beginning of the week can help maintain healthy eating habits. Additionally, consider couponing and watching for sales at your local grocery store. It's important to remember that a healthy diet is not about restricting yourself. Instead, focus on incorporating more fruits and vegetables into your diet, as well as increasing your daily water intake. I've also found that Pinterest is a great way to find some healthy, easy-to-make crock-pot recipes without putting much thought into cooking.

Social connections:

Your partner is likely one of the few people you talk to on a daily basis, and having that person deployed can create a void in your social life that needs to be filled. It is always helpful to have a "battle buddy" who also understands the challenges of deployment. There are a variety of ways to find your battle buddy. Whether it is through a Family Readiness Group, or meeting new acquaintances someplace

else, spending time with others (e.g., coffee, making dinner) is a great way to begin strengthening bonds with others in a similar situation. I found my battle buddy on Facebook in a support group for a training school my service member was attending. Having someone to talk to about my thoughts and feelings during these moments of separation made me feel stronger during deployment. For parents, consider joining or starting a play group to connect with other parents. The kids love making new friends and it gives you a chance to connect with others in your position.

Stress management:

Worrying about your partner's location, when you will get to talk to them next, and the uncertainty of homecoming dates can all be stressors of deployment. Although it is a nice thought to have an hour each day to take a bubble bath with candles and wine-my personal favorite-to take your mind off the stressors of life and deployment, it's not the best or most realistic choice for everyone. The best way I found to manage stress was to add a little fun into daily responsibilities. For example, eating is a necessity so consider grabbing some healthy take-out, invite some friends, and eat dinner outside! Another personal favorite was to have a virtual movie date with my partner over FaceTime. We'd establish a time to eat dinner on the weekend and turn on a movie that we both enjoyed. This experience was a great way to feel connected to my partner without focusing on the stress of him being gone.

Deployment, while difficult, is also temporary. Keeping focused on positive and healthy behaviors can improve your overall wellbeing while your partner is away.

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